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The Retreat of the Joint Chiefs

"The irony is that as the organization has grown more and more elaborate, the influence of the Joint Chiefs within the national security bureaucracy has grown steadily weaker. Today, the top military leaders in the land are reduced to presiding over hundreds of top-flight officers who perform little but make-work."

By Stuart Loory

The meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff convene as regularly as a West Point course in political science—and they are about as important to the overall operation of the Defense Establishment. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon, the top ranking generals and admirals in each of the four armed services plus their chairman—five in all—take their places around an oval walnut table in a room called "The Tank" just inside the mall entrance to the Pentagon.

The deputies to the Joint Chiefs have carefully prepared the scene. The thick gold carpeting has been swept clean and fluffed high. The necessary papers have been laid out on the table in front of each chair. Someone has thought to fill a couple of glass bowls with an assortment of penny candy on which the Joint Chiefs have traditionally sucked as they deliberate the affairs of the world and the needs of their services. "We like to keep the chiefs happy," an aide said in commenting on the penny candy touch. "They pretty much get what they want."

Five generals and admirals: Five regulation neckties carefully knotted. Five shirts freshly starched. Five jackets securely brass-buttoned. Five breasts emblazoned with row upon row of campaign and awards ribbons representing the achievements of a lifetime. Five pairs of trousers pressed to a fine crease by enlisted aides—service-provided valets, actually—each morning. Five pairs of shoes brought to a mirror-bright shine. These are the outward signs of professionalism. A military professional is known by the attention he pays to detail. Lack of attention to detail could someday mean the loss—needlessly—of lives under one's command and so all five of these men, since their earliest days at the service academies, have been taught to abhor the speck of dust, the scuff mark, or the wrinkle that betrays lack of attention to detail.

They are professionals all: Firm of jaw, trim of figure, possessed of the social graces, articulate, precise of movement. They epitomize what thousands of other officers someday hope to be. They take their seats around that table.

Their chairman was Admiral Thomas Hinman Moorer, 60, a jocular Alabamian who was a veteran of the Annapolis gridiron wars and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor where, on December 7, 1941, he was stationed as a young flying boat pilot. Shot down by the Japanese while flying another patrol in the Dutch East Indies in 1942, he was rescued and decorated for "courage and leadership" during a subsequent enemy attack that sank the rescue ship. He was a member of the post-World War II team that conducted the famous Strategic Bombing Survey to determine how much damage air raids had done to the Japanese home islands. Promoted to rear admiral at the age of 45, he commanded the Atlantic Fleet in the mid 1960s, served as Chief of Naval Operations from 1967 to 1969, and was named chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by President Nixon in 1970.

Representing the Army was General William Childs Westmoreland, 58, a South Carolinian who graduated from West Point in 1936 as first captain of the Corps of Cadets, announcing soon after to his fellow second lieutenants of field artillery that he expected one day to become Army Chief of Staff. By the age of 28 he was commanding a battalion. He commanded a full division before he turned 31. He was a veteran of combat in North Africa, Sicily, France, Belgium, and Germany. He forsook the field artillery in 1946 to earn his paratrooper's wings and transfer to the airborne infantry. During the Korean War he commanded an airborne regimental combat team. In 1953 he attended the Harvard Business School for a short course. Then he served successively as secretary of the Army General Staff; commander of the elite 101st Airborne Division; superintendent of West Point; commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg; then deputy commander and later commander of the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam. The prototypical ticket puncher, the man against whom thousands of other officers subsequently measured their careers—going through jump school to become "airborne," applying for graduate school, seeking battalion

General John Dale Ryan, 57, of Cherokee, Iowa, the Air Force Chief of Staff, graduated from West Point in 1938 where, like Moorer at Annapolis, he was a distinguished football player. In 1962, *Sports Illustrated* named him to a Silver Anniversary All-American Team composed of former college stars who had done well in their chosen professions. Ryan never saw combat at a level lower than lieutenant colonel, a grade he achieved at age 27 after progressing from first lieutenant to lieutenant colonel in two years. A bomber pilot, he became commander of the Strategic Air Command in 1964, commander of the Pacific Air Forces in 1967, and chief of staff of the Air Force in 1969.

Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Chief of Naval Operations, was the Navy's member. When "The Z," as he came to be known, was named Chief of Naval Operations by President Nixon in 1970, he was heralded as an iconoclast. There is little, however, in his background to suggest iconoclasm. After graduation from the Naval Academy in 1942, he served as a lieutenant junior grade on a destroyer, seeing action in the Battle of the Leyte Gulf. When the war ended, he took command of a Japanese River gunboat and sailed it up the Whangpoo River to Shanghai, an adventure on which he met, and married, the former Mouza Coutelais-du-Roche, a White Russian reared in Manchuria. In the Korean War, he served as a

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